

CyberImbiber Seminars | March 2020 | Covid Crisis

Tips to help with the transition to working at home

Remote work has suddenly been thrust upon many, at a massive scale. Whether you are skilled with remote work, or you just got tossed into the mix, the basic best practices to make work and home life easier are worth discussing, right now!

Let's review important guidelines for managers & teams.

Tips for Employees

It is important to bring the "work routine" home with you. Get dressed and cleaned up just like going to the office.

- Following the work routine puts you in the mood to work, and assures you will be presentable in front of a webcam.
- It also helps to send a message to family members that you are not staying home to play or do chores or errands during your job hours.
- Most importantly, you must resist continuing to work outside of job hours. Doing so will set a bad precedent with your company and, add to your stress and make your family unhappy.
- Neither you nor anyone else should ever apologize for making contact during working hours while you are working remotely.

If you don't have a good headset, get one. They do not need to be expensive.

- It's unlikely that the one at the office will work at home.
- I prefer a Plantronics with a USB-A connector, paired up with a USB-A to USB-C (or Lightning) adapter. This allows for me to plug a high quality set into both my PC and my smartphone.
- You could also use a Bluetooth earpiece but the audio quality will suffer.

Make your workplace real, not just the kitchen table.

- You can't organize your work effectively amidst home clutter and cooking.
- Find a place in the house that you can isolate, preferably with a door.
- Prepare for your pets to be even more difficult than children. Give them something to keep them busy!
- You may have seen commercials where people are working while lounging on the beach. It's possible to do that, also while driving on errands, but if you want to keep your job, keep your habits professional.

Push yourself to reach out to boss and coworkers, don't wait to be contacted.

- Your boss may be surprised at receiving unrequested status reports, but soon will be glad that you are doing so. This is especially important if you think that you need more time, you can predict a complication in a project or team, or if you are concerned about your interaction with a customer. Bosses prefer to be forewarned.
- Take a moment each day to say hello to co-workers through your online systems. Don't chat more than you would in the office, but do be consistent in making contact.

- Thank people when they are helpful! Kindness goes a long way when your colleagues are remote workers.

Don't share your system with the spouse or the kids.

- The same goes for a work device or a personal device.
- You don't want to get locked out because someone exceeded password retries, or company work to be lost, and you don't want unknown games (and maybe malware) on the work system.

Be aware of the Relationship Amplifier effect.

- When conventional social contact is lost, people can react more strongly to the remaining modes.
- If you are trying to reach someone, please give them a quick summary of the reason you are contacting them. Don't make them wonder or worry. Also, you will help them prioritize responses.
- If you try to sound normal in a call, you may sound blasé. On the other hand, if you are overly enthusiastic, you may sound insincere. Play with tone and energy.
- Smile when you are talking, and when you are writing. It really improves communication quality.
- Be conversational in your emails and messages. Don't write short, abrupt or terse messages. It may be alright with some people you know, but others will be offended, and over time their aggravation can build to a bursting point. Write in a natural way, as if you are speaking. Say hello at the beginning, and thank you at the end.
- Don't assume that people will get it when you think you are being funny, even just basically friendly. Add smileys or other emoticons to your writing to give them clues.
- If someone does misunderstand you: apologize, don't justify, and restate your communication in ways that you feel will be more suitable. If all else seems to fail, talk with that person on the phone or meet face to face on video, and do what you can to genuinely avoid future tension. If the other person decides to escalate a complaint, you can demonstrate the efforts you made.
- Practice working with several online conferencing systems. If your company has a favorite, make time to get proficient on your own. Learn all of the features for chatting, breakouts, whiteboards, etc.

Tips for Managers

It's not your fault that remote work skills were not taught in management school. The truth is that no course can prepare you, because no course creates the isolation environment and unique challenges of your business in a way that will help you perfect the experience.

- Be aware that the number one reason that remote work programs fail is because of managers who can't find a way to supervise and lead when employees are out of sight.
- The most important point to remember is the relationship amplifier, listed under Employee tips. You must be in control of this effect and you must look for any signs that it is happening among team members. Holding some sessions about netiquette and sharing anecdotes in focus groups can really help.

- If your workers naturally operate with systems that measure tasks, such as in a call center, you already have the information you need to see attendance and workflow.
- Since you can't manage by wandering around, it's time to focus on managing by results. Make sure that all project steps, tasks, goals, milestones and deliverables are formally scheduled, reviewed and available to the entire team, inside and outside of the office.
- Use telepresence technology! You have many ways to see if people are online or not, and to query status on work progress. Remember that if a person seems to not be online or is not responding quickly, they may be legitimately busy.
- Use location technology. You should have rules in place as to where people can work and notification methods if people plan to relocate for any reason. Modern network systems can report a user's system location. If there are objections to tracking user locations by means of their devices, then track the location and use of your business app, when it's activated.
- Create a level communication playing field. If there is a mix of people in an office and others remote, it does not work to have some folks muttering and gesturing in a conference room while everyone else is on a phone bridge. Send everyone to their desks and have them connect into a web conference system in exactly the same ways.
- If you have a mix of people in the office, out of the office and in different divisions, make an effort to coordinate key members of each group in your projects. In particular, tie their milestones together and partition bonuses and recognition in shorter increments, so that everyone must work together or everyone fails.
- You may already have some collaboration tools. This is the moment where those tools will serve or fail at scale. Give the employees some time and latitude to find the best ways to use them. If the tools are not working, don't be draconian, look for some better choices.
- Learn and teach protocols for prioritizing contacts. For example, if a person doesn't respond quickly enough to an email, try an instant message. If no response, try texting, and if that does not work, then a phone call. The order of contact will change with priority and the nature of your business.
- Start contests with some sort of rewards for suggestions for effective work, better tools and practices and so on.

Tips for Home Work Technology

Follow best practices to keep your cyber workplace safe and secure.

- Unclutter your Internet usage and consider upgrading your speed. A budget plan of 30 Mbps down and 6 Mbps up may be unusable for working at home, especially if the family is home streaming movies.
- If you are having Internet performance problems, try the following:
 - Check your actual delivery speed using Netflix's fast.com
 - Reduce TV streaming resolution to 720p, to reduce "bandwidth competition" from your family.
 - Grab an Ethernet cable and plug directly into your router. If you must count on Wi-Fi, check that you have a strong signal.
 - If possible, reduce conference webcam video from HD to 480p, and turn off your video during online meetings after you have waved hello to everyone.

- Close unnecessary browser tabs and desktop apps.
- Reboot your router at least once per week, and your PC/Mac every day.
- Start online meetings at 15 or 45 minutes after the hour.
- Make sure your security software and patches are up to date. These can be set for automatic, outside of business hours.
- Institute boot encryption with a strong password on all devices, and set a timeout & lock of 15 minutes or less.
- Don't use really old PCs. Hardware older than 2010 may be vulnerable to remote takeover attacks, and will underperform with online meetings. If you are buying a new PC, pay a bit more for a top end processor, and include at least 16GB of RAM.
- Use the latest version of Windows and the Mac OS. Oldies are not goodies.
- Don't bypass company systems, such as putting confidential information in a personal email or messenger app. Use the company workflow systems.
- Two or more monitors will make your life easier. All modern PCs and Macs can support two monitors. Add a docking station and you can have three or more!
- Set up a regular backup methodology for your work. Your company may have provided a cloud service, public or private. You can also do your own backups to OneDrive, DropBox, iCloud, GDrive and so on, or pay for a curated service such as Arq or Carbonite. Or get an external drive: A one terabyte drive can be found for less than \$50 these days.

Tips for community support and activism

- If you are in a state that does not currently support vote by mail during a crisis like Covid-19, this is the time to push for change.
- Call and check in on elderly people you know, especially ones that are not tech savvy and don't have the Internet as a means of communications.
- Promote sharing of scarce items through social media message boards
- Get involved in an activity that you can do at home such as sewing face mask covers, delivering food, etc.
- If you are doing outreach, consider that people suddenly at home all day will become increasingly unhappy to receive any kind of telemarketer solicitation by phone and probably have instituted anti-spam services or blocks on unknown callers. Text may be a better first contact method.
- Create and host online meetings and special interest groups that reflect your community interests.
- Monitor committees and commissions that may attempt to take action without proper public forum representation. This should not be happening under the governmental stay-at-home orders, but it's a concern.
- Tasks that require filing, process and required dates, such as FOIA can be actioned during the crisis. Get the clock ticking. Candidate declarations must be filed, according to established deadlines.

Got ideas to share with me? Send me an email - jgirard276@gmail.com

Additional references

What You Should Know About Online Tools During the COVID-19 Crisis

<https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2020/03/what-you-should-know-about-online-tools-during-covid-19-crisis>

LEADING GROUPS ONLINE *a down-and-dirty guide to leading online courses, meetings, trainings, and events during the coronavirus pandemic*

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States Weigh Expanding Absentee Voting

<https://www.npr.org/2020/03/24/820232540/as-coronavirus-delays-primary-season-states-weigh-expanding-absentee-voting>

Why the internet (probably) won't break during the coronavirus pandemic

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Speed checking services

Netflix: <https://fast.com/>

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Comparison article of several speed tests

<https://www.digitaltrends.com/computing/best-internet-speed-tests/>